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## Rabbi Gittelsohn's Iwo Jima Sermon

Sheldon M Young

The fight for Iwo Jima in 1945 was one of the bloodiest of World War II. A tiny island in the Pacific dominated by a volcanic mountain and pockmarked with caves, Iwo Jima was the setting for a five-week, non-stop battle between 70,000 American Marines and an unknown number of deeply entrenched Japanese defenders. The courage and gallantry of the American forces, climaxed in the dramatic raising of the American flag over Mt Suribachi, is memorialised in the Marine Corps monument in Washington DC. Less well-remembered, however, is that the battle occasioned an eloquent eulogy by a Marine Corps rabbi that has become an American classic.

Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn (1910–95), assigned to the Fifth Marine Division, was the first Jewish chaplain the Marine Corps ever appointed. The American invading force at Iwo Jima included approximately 1500 Jewish Marines, and Rabbi Gittelsohn was in the thick of the fray, ministering to Marines of all faiths in the combat zone. He shared the fear, horror and despair of the fighting men, each of whom knew that this day might be his last. Roland Gittelsohn's tireless efforts to comfort the wounded and encourage the fearful won him three service ribbons.

When the fighting was over, Division Chaplain Warren Cuthriell, a Protestant minister, asked Rabbi Gittelsohn to deliver the memorial sermon at a combined religious service dedicating the Marine Cemetery. Cuthriell wanted all the fallen Marines (black and white, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish) honoured in a single,

non-denominational ceremony. Unfortunately, racial and religious prejudice was strong in the Marine Corps, as it was then throughout America. According to Rabbi Gittelsohn's autobiography, the majority of Christian chaplains objected to having a rabbi preach over predominantly Christian graves. The Catholic chaplains, in keeping with church doctrine, opposed any form of joint religious service.

To his credit, Cuthriell refused to alter his plans. Gittelsohn, on the other hand, wanted to save his friend further embarrassment and so decided it was best not to deliver his sermon. Instead, three separate religious services were held. At the Jewish service, attended by a congregation of 70 or so, Rabbi Gittelsohn delivered the powerful eulogy he originally wrote for the combined service:

*Here lie men who loved America because their ancestors generations ago helped in her founding. And other men who loved her with equal passion because they themselves or their own fathers escaped from oppression to her blessed shores. Here lie officers and men, Negroes and whites, rich men and poor, together. Here are Protestants, Catholics, and Jews together. Here no man prefers another because of his faith or despises him because of his color. Here there are no quotas of how many from each group are admitted or allowed. Among these men there is no discrimination. No prejudices. No hatred. There is the highest and purest democracy ...*

*Whosoever of us lifts his hand in hate against a brother, or who thinks himself superior to those who happen to be in the minority, makes of this ceremony and the bloody sacrifice it commemorates, an empty, hollow mockery. To this then, as our solemn sacred duty, do we the living now dedicate ourselves: To the right of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, of white men and Negroes alike, to enjoy the democracy for which all of them have here paid the price ...*

*We here solemnly swear this shall not be in vain. Out of this and from the suffering and sorrow of those who mourn this, will come, we promise, the birth of a new freedom for the sons of men everywhere.<sup>1</sup>*

Among Gittelsohn's listeners were three Protestant chaplains so incensed by the prejudiced behaviour of their colleagues that they boycotted their own service to attend Gittelsohn's. One of them borrowed the manuscript and, unknown to Gittelsohn, circulated several thousand copies to his regiment. Some Marines enclosed the copies in letters to their families. An avalanche of coverage resulted. *Time* magazine published excerpts, which wire services spread even further.

The entire sermon was inserted into the Congressional Record, the Army released the eulogy for short-wave broadcast to American troops throughout the world and radio commentator Robert St John read it on his program and on many succeeding Memorial Days.

In 1995, in his last major public appearance before his death, Gittelsohn reread a portion of the eulogy at the 50th commemoration ceremony at the Iwo Jima statue in Washington DC. In his autobiography, Gittelsohn reflected, 'I have often wondered whether anyone would ever have heard of my Iwo Jima sermon had it not been for the bigoted attempt to ban it.' ■

## Endnotes

- 1 With grateful thanks to the American Jewish Historical Society for this excerpt.